

# Slow Editing Towards Equity Wikimedia Research Grant — Stage II Description

## Overview

Wikipedia's policies have the potential to enable and increase Wikipedia's capacity for knowledge equity. At the same time, this potential has been limited by the way they can also operate as barriers for this same goal. Policies are slow to change, conservative in their iterations, and they rely on community precedent and practice for legitimacy. As such, they resist bold changes and cannot be redirected on the basis of external academic or institutional authority. This poses a problem for initiatives that wish to address knowledge gaps at the level of policy. To aid in rectifying this situation, the proposed project investigates the types of socio-technical skills that Wikipedians can cultivate for this kind of "slow editing" in order to move equity initiatives through the policy development process.

The intended goal of this research is therefore to provide a set of best practices, skills, and role descriptions that Wikipedians can mobilize in order to enact policy changes. This will be achieved by using mixed methods (content analysis, qualitative textual analysis, and interface analysis) to study the moments when Wikipedians successfully and unsuccessfully garnered the broader acceptance of the community; such as by moving an essay or project page into a guideline or official policy. Additionally, this research will analyze these moments as they occurred within five languages editions: Arabic, Dutch, English, French, and Spanish. And finally, the research will include collecting and analyzing successful and failed policy proposals that are aligned with the goals of increasing knowledge equity.

The major impact of the work will be in increasing the knowledge of how Wikipedia's policy environment is developed and how these practices have shaped the success and failure of equity based policy proposals. In doing so, policy reform initiatives will benefit by learning from this history and can plan their activities and mentorship accordingly. Furthermore, this research will be applicable to multiple languages of Wikipedia and therefore adds to the capacity of the research to address the diverse needs of different Wikipedian communities. As such, it is expected that policy workshops and taskforces will use this information to train Wikipedians and new users on how to develop and maintain equitably policies.

## Background Description

Over the past decade, there has been a significant and concerted effort to address both Wikipedia's knowledge equity and the relative stagnation in increasing and retaining editors. This has manifested in article creation initiatives like Art+Feminism and Whose Knowledge?. However, knowledge equity is not just a question of content — it is also about process. As Amanda Menking and Jon Rosenberg recently argued in “WP:NOT, WP:NPOV, and Other Stories Wikipedia

Tells Us” (2020), Wikipedia's policy environment reinforces problematic norms about knowledge processes. Similar sentiments have been leveled against specific guidelines and policies dealing with reliable sources (Berson, Sengul-Jones and Tamani, 2021), notability (Gautier and Sawchuk, 2017; Tripodi, 2021) as well as consensus (Jankowski, 2022). As such there is a need to reconsider the foundational assumptions about knowledge that are being manifested in these community defining documents. Given this situation, the research project proposes that in order for the 2030 Wikimedia Strategic Direction on knowledge equity to succeed, these concerns about Wikipedia's policies must be addressed.

From the researchers listed above, each has suggested a number of ways to address this problem. They have argued for changing the policy language related to the concept of consensus, funding a taskforce to revitalize guidelines, reducing the number of policies, increasing contributions by research teams, and having the Wikimedia Foundation intervene more directly. At the same time, Tripodi was cognizant that the community may dismiss interventions especially if they come from the WMF and researchers; these efforts may simply be regarded as “recommendations” that Wikipedians may choose not to follow (2021, p. 14). To summarize, these researchers have identified two overall tracks of inquiry. First, how can policies be designed to be less of an epistemological barrier and be more representative of the concerns of Wikipedia's diverse group of contributors? Following the methods established by Art+Feminism (Tamani et al, 2019), this question could be answered by the WMF providing funding and support for off-wiki events or on-wiki taskforces who draft new essays and workshop potential changes to existing policies. However, these kinds of activities also need to be supported by information and mentorship on how to change policy — similar to the dual role that edit-a-thons have played in training new users on how to contribute to Wikipedia (Gluza, Turaj and Meier, 2021). This points to a second knowledge gap: what are the skills and roles that contributors need to cultivate in order to be effective members of developing equitable policies? Following the WMF's taxonomy of knowledge gaps (Redi, et al, 2020), this research proposal concentrates on these interaction gaps of policy contributors.

There are a number of studies that provide a basis for this work. To begin, it is clear that policy development has played a key role in shaping the governance (Viégas, Wattenberg and McKeon, 2007; Kriplean, et al, 2007; Beschastnikh, et al, 2008) and culture (Reagle, 2010; Leitch, 2014) of Wikipedia. Keegan and Fiesler (2017) have expanded on this work by providing a broad overview of Wikipedia's English policy environment and how user

behaviours on policy pages can be used to sketch a history of policy development. Importantly, they identified that rule-making

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has been shaped by three distinct eras: “scaling” community norms (2001-2005), a transitional period (2005–2010), and an institutionalization of norms (2011–). This shift was marked by differences in the tempo of editing (p. 116), and activity movement between different categories of rules (p. 119). As such, broad changes in policy editing behaviours can be understood as the markers of the community’s changing perception of what policies should do. In addition to examining the policy environment as a whole, there have also been studies of the specific content of the policies themselves. For example, the longest and most significant conversations on the NPOV policy talk page were analyzed to understand how that policy came into being (Matei and Dobrescu, 2011). Likewise, the talkpage of WP:Consensus was analyzed to understand the multiple and conflicting meanings of consensus that have been inscribed on the project page (Jankowski, 2022).

While serving as an important background, these studies do not answer the specific question of how Wikipedians change policy. What has yet to be studied are the precise skills and roles that Wikipedians enlist in order to transition a rule from one tier to the next. In other words, how does an essay become a policy? Or once established, how do these policies undergo significant changes? Furthermore, do these skills and roles differ from one language edition to another? And finally, what are the existing policy proposals that have attempted to address the problems of policy as barriers to equity? Did they fail or succeed, and on what grounds? In answering these questions, Wikipedians invested in increasing knowledge equity within policies will be better equipped for the task of slow editing.

## Methodology & Strategies

To understand the methods chosen for this research, it is necessary to first understand how the research object will be theorized. In this particular instance, policies and policy-making will be conceptualized according to legal scholar Cornelia Vismann’s position that legal media exist as “cultural techniques” (Vismann, 2008; 2013). This means that the “making” of policy is not simply the translation of a wiki-based discussion into a document. Instead, policy development will be understood as the combination of actions and tools that connect logics (how it is argued into being on the talk page), inscription and storage (the changing composition of the policy page), and its circulation (practices of hyperlinking to policy documents). This theoretical approach falls in line with previous research about Wikipedian governance that is sensitive to the entwined relationship between social practices and technical operations (Geiger, 2017; Ford and Wajcman, 2017). Consequently, this socio-technical approach requires a unique set of mixed methods. In particular, one that combines the quantitative benefits of content analysis, the interpretative value of textual analysis, and the media-sensitivity of interface analysis, methods that I have used in other research projects (Jankowski, 2021, 2022). The synthesis of these methods will provide the means for answering the following research

RQ1. What kinds of skills and roles have Wikipedians used to move a rule from an initial project page (or essay) to established policy?

RQ2. What are the markers of successful policy proposals and the barriers for unsuccessful policy proposals dedicated to increasing knowledge equity?

### Research Strategy 1: Policy Development Skills and Roles

#### *Data Collection*

While the following outlines the method as it pertains to English Wikipedia, similar steps will be followed when analyzing the Arabic, Dutch, French, and Spanish Wikipedias. The purpose of this analysis is to understand how Wikipedians changed policy in order to increase its visibility and circulation within the broader community. A sample of ten most viewed and referenced rules will therefore be collected for this purpose. On English Wikipedia, this will be calculated checking the list of policies (Wikipedia, 2022), against their page views listed on [pageviews.wmcloud.org](https://pageviews.wmcloud.org), and the number of links to the page recorded through [linkcount.toolforge.org](https://linkcount.toolforge.org). Next, the history of each rule will be examined to identify the specific date when the policy or guideline template was added to the rule, indicating that the rule had reached a new status. In order to assess when a substantial change to an established policy occurred, a textual analysis of the edits surrounding a significant change in bytes will be conducted to identify whether it was in fact, a substantial change. This process will be aided by each policy's article info graph provided through [xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo](https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo). Once these dates are established, all edits for the prior 90 days on the project page and the talk page will be collected and processed through a textual and interface analysis. As demonstrated in previous research (Jankowski, 2022), policy shortcuts have been used as indicators of community consensus. Therefore, by counting the number of times a policy shortcut of a developing policy was used, I will analyze whether or not this activity plays a role in legitimizing the moment of policy transition. In order to assess the circulation of the rule, the number of hits for Google search (with a custom period range in the verbatim mode using a query such as: `site:en.Wikipedia.org "WP:*"`) will be recorded for a set period of 90 days before and 90 days after the rule transitioned to its new status. This will be conducted to observe whether or not the increase in status lead to an increase in the use of the policy's shortcuts across Wikipedia.

#### *Analysis*

During this stage, policy talk pages will be analyzed according to a coding schema that includes lobbying (Keegan and Fiesle, 2017, p. 118), consensus practices (Jankowski, 2022), as well as any other emergent activities that will be observed through several interpretative passes of the text. A content analysis will be conducted to assess the connections between talkpage discussions by particular users and edits made to the project page. In this way, connections between talk and changes to the policy can be identified. The role of the interface analysis will also be used to

assess how changes to the composition of the project page are connected to the rule's changing status.

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As a result, each of the policies will be described in terms of their transitions (for example, from essay or project page to guideline; guidelines to policy; and established policy to changed policy) and the categories of technical and discursive skills and roles that each transition required. Likewise, the analysis of the project page, the talk page, and the temporal diffusion of policy shortcuts will provide insight into the types of skills and social roles enlisted to develop a community-defining document.

Research Strategy 2: Assessment of knowledge equity policy proposals

#### *Data Collection*

While the following outlines the method as it pertains to English Wikipedia, similar steps will be followed when analyzing the Arabic, Dutch, French, and Spanish Wikipedias. The purpose of this analysis is to understand which proposals have already been made to address knowledge equity gaps within Wikipedia policies. First, a coding schema of what constitutes an equity-based policy proposal will be derived from definitions and examples of equity included in the 2030 Wikimedia Strategic Direction document. These definitions will be used to filter the large corpus of policy proposals listed under the "Wikipedia proposals" category (which includes the sub-category of "Failed Proposals") as well as the posts to "Wikipedia:Village\_pump\_(proposals)." These proposals will be further categorized by using the taxonomy of knowledge gaps as a means to distinguish between the types of gaps that each proposal was attempting to address.

#### *Analysis*

With the support of the skills and roles outlined for successful policy development in RQ1, the corpus of policy proposals will be examined through a textual analysis. In particular, statements about why proposals were rejected, allowed to proceed, or were limited to a particular rule level will be recorded. The resulting analysis will summarize the common and the unique considerations that equity-based policy proposals have been subjected to by the Wikipedia community for the five languages of this study.

Communication Strategy 1: Academic Networks

Because this project is research-based, an important component of circulating the results will be in communicating it to the academic community. In addition to using mailing-lists, the research will be composed as a research article and submitted to high-impact open access journal. The goal for this strategy is to ensure that the research is subjected to a high level of peer review as well as be accessible to Wikipedians. Additionally, this research will be presented at academic conferences, with one of the goals to be accepted at the International Communication Association's annual conference.

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## Communication Strategy 2: Wikipedian Networks

Of course, Wikipedians will also need to be made aware of the project, its development, and its reports through Wikiproject talk pages, noticeboards, social media networks, and the Wikimania conference. In addition to create a general awareness of the project, a key deliverable will a report, guideline, and slide deck for “Slow Editing Towards Equity.” Presented in plain language, these materials will be designed with the purpose of being distributed and used during edit-a-thons or policy workshops. They will provide information that will familiarize new users and active Wikipedians about Wikipedia’s policy environment. Additionally — and more importantly — it will explain the processes and skills required to make changes to policies. It will be translated into the five languages of the study and have specific sections dedicated to each. A key communication activity will therefore to circulate these materials through social media networks and contacting edit-a-thon facilitators. These materials will also serve as a starting point to raise awareness of the research with international news organizations.

## Past and Future Capacities of the Project

### *Past Contributions*

Wikipedia has been my research topic for over a decade for both my PhD dissertation and Master’s thesis. I have disseminated this research as a book chapter as well as at several academic conferences. Additionally, I have coordinated three Wikipedia workshops at academic conferences. I have also recently published a peer-reviewed article on the topic on the formation of English Wikipedia’s consensus policy. A number of the methods described in this proposal have been developed through these various research efforts. More directly related to Wikimedia initiatives, I presented my research at Wikimania 2017 and I was the Wikipedia Visiting Scholar at the Centre for Digital Scholarship at the University of Windsor in Canada from 2018 to 2020. I have also contributed three article reviews to the *Wikimedia Research Newsletter*. This background provides me a unique insight as both a contributor as well as a dedicated researcher to exploring how Wikimedia’s focus on knowledge equity can be incorporated at the level of policy.

### *Future Contributions*

I acknowledge that the primary goal of this research — to make Wikipedian policies more equitable — exceeds the time-frame, scope, and activities of the current research grant. In many ways, the current proposal can only be seen as an incremental — yet critical — step in that process. As such, upon the development of this research project, I will be seeking ways to continue this research by applying to future grants administered by Wikimedia, as well as applying for research funding from the Global Digital Cultures interdisciplinary research community located at my university which awards upwards of EUR 30,000 for projects each year.

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